



Good Conversations and an Open Future

The CPCE visits churches in Sweden and Finland. By Stephanie Dietrich.

Church Geography in the North of Europe: a Special Ecumenical Situation

The northern countries may appear exotic from a central European perspective: Geographically speaking, they are extending thousands of kilometers from north to south and west to east. The more to the north one travels, the more sparsely they are populated. All countries have large Lutheran churches; in fact, they are among the largest existing Lutheran churches in the world. They consider themselves national or territorial churches. In Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Sweden and Finland, the majority of the population formally belongs to these churches. In the Nordic countries, the church is closely related to state structures, even though the separation of state and church has been discussed as well as partly implemented in the past years. Migration, the immigration of religious minorities from around the world, and the growing secularization of societies have contributed to the fact that the big Nordic national churches, too, are rethinking their identity, despite their nominal majority positions. In the Norwegian church, for example, this development has led to a number of reform processes such as the state-church reform, the worship service reform and the religious education reform.

Ecumenical Relationships and Self-Concept

All Nordic churches consider themselves Lutheran churches; neither the term “Evangelical” nor the term “Protestant” correspond to their self-concept. Thus, for these churches, their bond to the Lutheran World Federation marks the center of ecumenical efforts. Moreover, the Lutheran Reformation did not represent a completely radical break in church life in the Nordic countries as it did in most other European countries. Even though the Lutheran Reformers brought new ways of thinking to these countries, the churches there still kept their self-concept of being a continuation of the existing churches in the north. The historical bishoprics were maintained even after the Reformation. In Sweden and Finland, even bishops were retained and transitioned to the Protestant faith while superintendents were appointed in Denmark and Sweden by the Reformer Bugenhagen.

Ever since that time, the Roman Catholic Church only represented a small minority, mainly as a migration church, in all Nordic countries. In the past few years, the Swedish and Finnish churches in particular have intensified their official dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church.

All Nordic churches (Denmark in the fall of 2010) have signed the Porvoo Agreement with the Anglican churches in Great Britain and Ireland, as well as with the Estonian and Latvian churches. Among other things, this agreement includes the complete mutual recognition of ministries among the undersigned churches. The Porvoo Agreement plays an important role for the ecumenical development in the north of Europe.

Even though the Nordic churches may seem very alike to an outside observer, they still have historically and theologically different focuses. Traditionally, the Swedish and Finnish Lutheran churches have always emphasized the importance of the church-leading ministry for church unity. In Denmark and Norway, the pietistic revival movement on the one hand and Grundtvigianism on the other have left their lasting imprint on the self-concept of these churches.

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The Nordic churches were strongly involved in the conversations leading up to the Leuenberg Concord, but none of the Nordic churches was among the first to sign for various reasons, including issues of church law as well as pragmatic and theological aspects. The Norwegian Church decided during its 1999 synod to sign the Concord; the Danish church followed suit in 2001. For both of these churches, it is important to emphasize the compatibility between the Porvoo Agreement and the Leuenberg Concord in order to counteract a formation of blocks with European ecumenism. Both the Swedish and the Finnish churches are continuing to participate in CEC dialogues and debates, but have guest status as long as they do not sign the Concord.

The good relationship the CPCE is maintaining with these churches occasioned an official visit in Sweden and Finland this past June. The purpose of these visits was to talk about continuing cooperation and to discuss developments within the CPCE with the governing bodies of the Swedish and Finnish churches. The CPCE General Secretary, Michael Bünker, the two Co-Presidents Michael Beintker and Stephanie Dietrich, as well as Jochen Kramm as the representative of the committee's office, formed the delegation traveling to Helsinki, Uppsala and Stockholm.

In addition to a conversation about the relationship of the Lutheran churches in Sweden and Finland to the CPCE, the agenda also included current results of doctrinal dialogues and projects such as the planning of the Reformation Jubilee in Europe or the search for common standards for theological education and training.

After visiting the governing bodies of the national churches, the delegation also visited the governing body of the Swedish missionary church for a first meeting. This church is a member of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, but has not formally discussed signing the Leuenberg Concord yet.

The CPCE hopes that its new Regional Group North will find new ways of regional cooperation in the north of Europe during its first meeting in Copenhagen in October. In addition to the Nordic national churches, the Protestant churches in Great Britain, Northern Germany, the Baltic States and Poland, are invited, as well as the Methodist church in the north and the Baltic States.

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